



## Testimony Human Services Committee Senate Bill 1012

March 15, 2011

Good morning. I am Diane Weaver Dunne, the executive director of CRIS Radio, a nonprofit radio reading service for people who are blind, physically challenged or learning disabled. I come before you to speak as the head of CRIS Radio and on behalf of a coalition called Access Connecticut, a group of organizations dedicated to improving the lives of people who are blind and disabled. We are united in our opposition to Senate Bill 1012. The coalition includes CRIS Radio, the Connecticut affiliate of the National Federation of the Blind and the Agency Consumer Advisory Committee, which is comprised of a number of other organizations dedicated to a similar mission. Those organizations also include the Blinded Veterans Association of Connecticut, the Visual Impairment Services Team of the Veterans Association of Connecticut, and the Southeast Connecticut Community Center of the Blind.

Separating services for the blind under the Department of Social Services and the Department of Education is not a new idea. But it is a bad idea.

The proposed consolidation of administrative functions of the Board of Education and Services for the Blind as proposed by Gov. Malloy will likely **reduce** the quality of service inherent with complex bureaucracies while **NOT** realizing meaningful savings – at best \$300,000 after factoring in the loss of federal reimbursement dollars and defunding three administrative positions. We all have to share the pain to reduce the state's \$3.2 billion deficit. But the proposed bill saves just 1/100<sup>th</sup> percent of that amount while impairing the voice of the only agency -- Board of Education and Services for the Blind (BESB) -- that focuses on the needs and demands of the state's blind, deaf-blind and visually impaired population.

Under the bill, the board for BESB will be reduced to that of an advisory function and the continuum of its services will be dissected among two other state agencies. There is no evidence that such a move will improve services to the blind; rather, long-term studies demonstrate just the opposite, especially for children who are blind.

In fact, research has found that separate programs for the blind have significantly better outcomes. A study about to be published by scholars at Mississippi State University found that separate agencies serve a greater percentage of legally blind people and provide more comprehensive services that result in a higher rehabilitation rate with nearly twice as many likely to be self-supporting when their services conclude.

Separate agencies also help the blind earn better wages, according to yet another 111-page analysis [entitled "Effects Of Agency Structure and Client Characteristics On Rehabilitation Services and Outcomes For Consumers Who Are Blind," <http://www.nfbmi.org/downloads/MississippiStateStudyMono.doc>]. With jobs creation and employment a key factor to our state's economic recovery, it is important to note that the competitive

employment rate of legally blind clients was significantly higher when served by a separate agency exclusively dedicated to the blind.

These studies have found that true cost effectiveness, efficient and timely service, focused management, and competent, targeted leadership produce better rehabilitation outcomes for people who are blind. That is why BESB and its acting director, Brian Sigman, who has devoted more than 20 years working with Connecticut's blind community including serving as BESB's executive director for the past seven years, have demonstrated the kind of outcomes that best serve the state's blind community in a cost-efficient manner.

There are a number of ways to reform Connecticut's government and its spending while IMPROVING services, not diminishing them. The merger proposal will diminish services to the state's blind, one of the most vulnerable populations in our state, without offering taxpayers a material saving.

Respectfully submitted,

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